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The rise of Karaim cultural nationalism as part of the European movement

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Abstract

In the nationalistic-revivalist atmosphere which prevailed in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 19th century and the first four decades of the 20th century, it would indeed be a real miracle if the Karaims, with all their ethnic characteristics, had remained untouched by nationalist movements. In the framework of the essential definitions of nation, nationalism and ethnicity, their religion, languages, calendar, endogamic family ties, social organization, leadership and etiological myths represent the most characteristic markers of an ethnic group or ethnic minority. This conclusion is supported by a great number of ethnic symbols which distinguish the Karaims from Jews and other neighbouring peoples. For their part, the decisions of the Austrian and Russian authorities in favour of the Karaims after 1774 constituted the basis for their status as a juridically independent in-group. The recurrent negative definitions of the Karaims as a Jewish sect etc. can be considered neither appropriate nor up-to-date.

Keywords

Nationalism, ethnicity, nationalistic-revivalist atmosphere, national revival of Karaims

Nationalism has been one of the most important social and cultural forces in Europe, the Americas and globally for more than two hundred years. Various schools of historical research, liberal economists and Marxists alike, though disagreeing in general terms, admit that the rise of nation-states and nationalism was an inevitable step forward in historical development.

Nevertheless, after two centuries, there is no definition of nation and nationalism which would enjoy the general appreciation of scholars. As a consequence, very different and quantitatively very unequal groups of people can be considered to be nations.

In the first half of the 18th century a common ruler and a common confession of faith, religion, still constituted the basis of the identity to which obedient subjects were expected to adhere. By contrast, race, language and common culture were not considered essential denominators in the discussion of in-groups and outsiders.

In what follows I shall try to present the features which are most usually characterized as conspicuous hallmarks of national movements.

In the early so-called "romantic" justification of nationalism a common language was considered to be the ultimate criterion of a nation. Although it soon became evident that language could not offer a decisive common denominator for a people, for example in the case of German or English, the importance of linguistic unity cannot be denied as being a leading hallmark of a people and nation (Hobsbawm 1990: 51-63, 101-111).

I mentioned above the pivotal position of religion and denomination in earlier centuries. In the days when national movements arose, affiliation to a particular creed was inevitable, and it constituted a barrier between different groups residing in the same cities or regions. In European countries non-Christians, i.e. Jews and Muslims in particular, faced numerous difficulties in gaining entrance to their local societies. Even if the rise of nationalism can be interpreted as implying a new "civic religion" our daily mass media indicate very clearly that the role of religion has by no means disappeared from national features. (For the connection between religion and nationalism, see Smith 2003).

Ethnic origin, ancestry and genetic physical characteristics have enjoyed an important place in the national sagas which often go back to a mythical past and connect an ethnic group to a particular region. Numerous Slavonic peoples and Jews can be referred to as sympathizers with this ideology. According to Anthony D. Smith, myths of this type are the essential initiatory force of nationalism (Smith 1999; for the ethnic origins of nations, see Smith 1986 and 1991).

Adherents of so-called "romantic" viewpoints have strongly defended their focal positions in nationalistic ideologies, disputes, policy and acts in the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century. Alongside these views, liberals have emphasized residence in the same region and dependence on the same ruler or a common legal system (Day and Thompson 2004: 54-59; Kohn 1994).

Often nationalism is connected with political ambitions and the desire to build an independent entity, state or autonomous territory; in fact the map of Europe is the outcome of the consequences of national revival movements. However, only a few countries are homogeneous in terms of their population, and perhaps ninety percent of independent states consist of several ethnic groups.

While the definition of nation and nationalism is a complicated question, the originally Greek noun *éthnos* and its derivatives 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' pose parallel difficulties. Today they usually "relate to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background" – as the *Free Merriam-Webster* (m-w.com) puts it. Here we have four clauses which an ethnic group should fulfill, in part at least: (1) a self-identification between "us" and "others", (2) common lines of descent, (3) distinctive cultural features, and (4) a social organization that offers possibilities of collective acts and aspirations. While definitions are numerous, these presuppositions presented by Erik Allardt and Christian Starck (1981: 42-44) are repeated in various forms in academic discussion.

However, the awareness of a shared origin, language and religion or the possible advantages which these features may offer, i.e. a rational choice, does not appear to be synonymous with a continuous commitment to an ethnic group. Emotional aspects play an essential role at the same time. The introduction and approval of new symbols, as well as the re-interpretation of previous ones, corroborate the experience of being an in-group, distinguished from other ethnic groups. Flags, coats-of-arms, anthems and other songs, ethnic heroes and their exploits, or oral, literary and artistic works may be referred to as this kind of symbols. They may adorn nations, states and small ethnic groups as well. The symbols, both old and newly adopted, are not necessarily authentic in the historical or academic sense; however, their sentimental value lends

them a genuine and constructive glory. To a certain extent, ethnicity is based on the distinctions that people intuitively make between themselves and others, and the detectable cultural differences, regardless of their origins, may play a minor role (Barth 1969; Hutchinson, Smith 1996).

Inside an integral frame work of a society, the various ethnic minorities can be considered to constitute sub-groups which have adapted themselves to the more extensive entity or are in a process of adaptation; inside this society they may represent particular abilities, occupations, social levels etc. Naturally, this is not a rule; in contrast we can enumerate many ethnic minorities which, instead of being gratified sub-groups, chase an better position with violent methods, as well. And further, various linguistic, religious and regional identities still are or can be more important than a nation or state in cases like Scots, Basques, Flemings, Catalans and Jews (Valtonen 2004).

'Community in anonymity' is a key term in Benedict Anderson's well-known *Invent a Nation* theory which stresses he subconscious cohesion of anonymous members of a nation (Anderson 1983/2006). However, in the case of small ethnic groups the supporters of an ethnic movement, as a rule, know personally the majority of the participants, their family relations over many generations and their reputation as regards facts and rumours. This implies that the development of a national saga can differ from that of the bigger nations.

Up till now I have briefly described a number of the principal characteristics of national and ethnic movements which are most often referred to when dealing with these phenomena in both popular and academic connections. I know that there is very little new in this list. However, in my opinion, they offer a fundamental framework with which any national or ethnic revival movement can be compared.

Against this background we may now seek such phenomena in the Karaim movement in Eastern Europe which agreed or disagreed with the general trends of nationalism and ethnic experiences in the period of national revival.

Immediately we may state that no great surprises are to be expected.

As for the earliest criteria of a nation or ethnic group, a common language and religion were referred to. Among the Karaims of Lithuania and Poland, multilingualism was for centuries a normal phenomenon. However, till the

beginning of the twentieth century the Turkic Karaim language was spoken by the great majority of the adherents of the Karaim version of religion which derives its origins from Judaism. Until the last decades of the nineteenth century the language was written in Hebrew characters (Németh 2012). The position of the Karaim language in the Crimea and Constantinople is more complicated; nevertheless, at least the Hebrew characters distinguished their language from other Turkic languages (Jankowski 2003; Jankowski 2008). No other nations or ethnic groups followed suit in these regions.[1]

The Karaim language(s), the Karaim religion and Hebrew script were hallmarks shared by the same persons. Their religion, Karaism, represented the Karaite interpretation of Judaism that only venerates the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and rejects the Mishna, Talmud and other Rabbinic Jewish literature as guide books of the religion. Elsewhere the Karaite version of Judaism has been professed by Arabic-speaking Karaite Jews in the Middle East, in Egypt, Iraq and Israel, in particular.

In Eastern Europe Hebrew was the language of liturgy and literary activities among both Rabbanite Jews and Karaims. However, the pronunciation of Hebrew was divided into two different traditions: Yiddish-speaking Rabbanite Jews followed the Ashkenazi type of pronunciation *(be-reíshis bóro* etc.), while the Karaim pronunciation is derived from the Sephardi branch of the *be-reshít barά* -type. In addition, Karaims have retained the guttural assimilation of *shewa* vowels. This means that they read *tohōm* instead of *tehōm, Juhuda* and not *Jehuda, nu.ūm* instead of *ńe.ūm, šixita* instead of *šexita,* etc. This genuine phenomenon of Tiberian Hebrew is retained elsewhere solely among the Jews of Yemen (Harviainen 1997; Harviainen 2013). Alongside the pronunciation, the cantillation traditions of the liturgical Hebrew texts and the liturgy itself deviate essentially from one another among East European Jews and Karaims. Also, calendars, and as a consequence, the dates of religious high holidays have diverged for centuries (Shamuel 2003; Firkovičius, Firkavičiūtė and Maškevič 2001). The internal schooling system aided the

[1] Though the Rabbanite Krymchaks in the Crimea wrote their Turkic language (and Hebrew) in Hebrew characters, they differed from Karaims in numerous other respects.

retention of the Karaim traditions as common knowledge among the community members.

As for their origins, a well-known story tells that Crimean Karaims were unable to explain this matter to the Russian authorities in 1839, and as a consequence Abraham Firkovich set off to search for evidence. With the help of his enormous discoveries – and without them – numerous contradictory theories concerning the origins of the Karaim group came to be proposed (Harviainen 2003: 636-643). Irrespective of their correctness, their existence was important and attracted attention. Similarly intriguing was the story of the Karaim soldiers who were settled in Trakai/Troki/Troch by Grand Duke Vytautas (Vitold) to serve as his bodyguard there. Up till now the story has not been corroborated before the nineteenth century, but as an etiological myth it was impressive (Kizilov 2009: 33-34).

No evidence supports the occurrence of mixed marriages among the Karaims in earlier periods, and even later internal endogamy has been a prerequisite of Karaim ancestry. The awareness of family connections and parentage guarantees that the boundary between the in-group and others has remained stable. To the best of my knowledge genetic physical characteristics have not aroused special attention among Karaims themselves, though in the 1930s some scholars tried to introduce Karaims in their descriptions of races (Gini 1936).

Traditionally, Karaims lived in small towns in which their settlements were located in the same areas where *kenesas* and other community premises were built or acquired,[2] and they had their own religious leaders, *hacham* and *hazzanim,* who, besides leading religious services, promulgated decrees on internal matters, settled lawsuits according to their religious-legal system and represented the community in relation to the (Russian) authorities. These features agree with the focus of the so-called liberal conception of a nation, mentioned above.

Political independence has never been one of the ambitions of the Karaims of Europe.

[2] A great number of informative old photos have been collected and published by Mariola Abkowicz and Anna Sulimowicz (2010).

Irrespective of the difficulties of producing a definition, the designation of an *ethnic* group, *ethnic* minority, instead of a 'nation' would be most suitable when referring to the Karaims. As for the most significant markers of an ethnic group, endogamic family ties, myths of origin, distinctive cultural features, especially language and religion, and a social organization led by religious leaders have already been dealt with. These factors have outlined the border lines between the Karaims and other ethnic groups and nationalities in all the areas where they have dwelt.

Further, we may again remind ourselves of the symbols which describe the sentimental aspects of self-identification and its growing value among the Karaims. The costumes and headdresses of the Karaim religious leaders have been characteristic of them for two centuries at least; their origin and date have no importance in this sentimental-ethnic role. Similarly, many other items can be referred to as symbols retained or introduced in various periods to strengthen the ethnic sentiments: wedding customs, traditional dishes – *kybynlar* lamb pasties, in particular – flag, music tradition (Firkavičiūtė 2012), poetry and songs in the Karaim language, new dances and festive clothing adopted from the Crimea in recent decades, multilingual albums depicting Karaim soldiers who served in a number of different armies (Zajončkovskis 2000 & 2005), etc. (cf. Zajączkowski 1961: 53-63).

Till the end of the 18th century Karaims had stayed more or less in the shadow of their Rabbanite "brethren" as regards the taxation and other connections with the Polish-Lithuanian administration. In the Crimea the demographic and economic situation had been more favourable to Karaims and their ties with the Turkic rulers. The Crimean Karaims became Russian subjects in the 1790s. In parallel, the partitions of Poland assigned the Polish-Lithuanian Karaims to the allegiance of Russia in the same years. Solely a small number of Karaim farmers in Halicz and its environs ended up in Austria. There they were granted the same rights as were enjoyed by the Christian citizens, in 1774, while the initial steps of enhancing the position of Rabbanite Jews were taken seven years later, in 1781. On a governmental juridical level these acts clearly distinguished between Karaims and Jews (Kizilov 2009: 57-65).

In 1795 and 1827, two delegations of Crimean Karaims succeeded in exempting their community from a double poll tax and the military service which were imposed by the Russian authorities upon Rabbanite Jews and Karaims. The conscription remained in force for Rabbanite Jews, but exemption was extended to apply to the Karaims as well in former Poland-Lithuania one year later. Ten years later, in 1837, a consistory was established to represent officially the Karaims of Taurida and Odessa; another consistory for the Karaims in former Poland-Lithuania was instituted in Troki in 1850. In today's terminology a spiritual consistory represented a religious-ethnic minority. No corresponding self-governmental organ was granted for Rabbanite Jews in the Russian Empire. The internal logic of these Russian decisions is unknown. However, we can hardly refer to nationalism or an ethnic revival as a principal factor behind these consequential events. In contrast, these acts of the Russian authorities could be seen as a part of the general *divide et impera* minority policy; the incorporation of the Crimea and the Polish territories had linked a million of Jews into the Russian Empire which until those decades had very limited experience of dealing with Jewish subjects. Nevertheless, the decisions constituted firm support for an extending knowledge of a status as a Karaim in-group (Miller 1993: 13-48).

While Dutch, Swedish, German and Polish scholars had been interested in the Karaims of earlier times, research into the origins of the Karaim community and its history was actively inaugurated by the Karaims themselves in the 1840s. The rise of scholarly activity agrees well with the well-known scheme delineated by Professor Miroslav Hroch for the development of the various national revival movements among the smaller European nations; in his comparative paradigm it constitutes the initial Phase A – the period of academic interest; the following phase B is characterized by him as the period of patriotic agitation, and the third phase C as the final stage of the rise of a mass national movement (summarized in Hroch 1985: 22-24).

In Poland, the combination of the re-liberation spirit, romanticism and nationalism was deeply rooted from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward. For the Karaims in former Poland-Lithuania, Polish had been a familiar language for centuries and influences from Poland easily reached them. In the

Crimea the well-to-do stratum of Karaims was more extensive, and thanks to their education and the mass media this social class was well aware of the contemporary ideological movements in Europe.

Numerous revivalist manifestos published in many languages in Karaim journals and elsewhere could be quoted from the last decades of the 19th century onwards.[3] In the general nationalistic-revivalist atmosphere, which prevailed in Eastern Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth century, it would be a real miracle if the Karaims, with all the ethnic prerequisites described above, had remained untouched by other national movements. In this case they would have constituted a totally surprising exception among all the ethnic groups, large and small, in surrounding countries.

The progress of the Karaim movement followed the normal lines of a nationalistic revival in Europe, and in Eastern Europe in particular; it started from the great number of distinctive features and their study, and the process led to a clear awareness of being a detached ethnic group with cultural characteristics of its own. In a tragic way, the Communist and Nazi regimes did not allow this ethnic minority to continue the development of their cultural life, either in the Crimea or in the Western areas. And a new revival over the past two decades has been a very demanding process.

It would be an interesting and important task to collect and study in greater depth statements and expressions which reflect the national revival of the Karaims; there is plenty of material, but the viewpoint of nationalism or ethnicity has not attracted much attention. The fact that the terms referring to nationalism or national and ethnic features had very suspect connotations in the Communist ideology of East European countries is not a satisfactory explanation. On the other hand, negative terms such as separatism, sect,

[3] The paper "The News of the Taurida and Odessa Karaite Religious Consistory: Self-Identification of the Karaites" read by Veronika Klimova at the conference *"Cultures in Conversation: Hebrew and Karaite Literature in Poland and Eastern Europe"* (Poznań 2012) offers an excellent presentation of this sort of material.

dejudaization and even more demonized ones reflect the ancient and contemporary prejudices of many investigators.

Within Judaism the existence of various independent nationalities or ethnic groups has never been favoured; by contrast such attempts have been interpreted as representing apostasy and a violation of the unity of the Jewish people. For a scholar living in multinational and multicultural Europe views of this sort do not seem very up-to-date.

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